

Auburn man finds beauty in huge collection of 'ordinary rocks'

Sam McManis, Sacramento Bee, 12-9-10

It is just another rock, one of so many to be found along the shore at the American River's north-middle fork confluence in the canyon below Auburn. Dark gray, speckled with the barest hint of glittery crystals, it stands out only because of the man holding it.

Dave Imgrund sees the beauty in ordinary objects, spots brilliance in the mundane. Cupped in his lightly calloused hand, this lump of greenstone granite becomes imbued with significance, transformed from a tightly packed collection of minerals into something sublime in its simplicity.

He holds it out like an offering to demonstrate its density and heft. He rubs his fingertips slowly over its smooth surface. He rotates the rounded egg shape in his palm, reveling in its contours.

"Can you imagine how many miles these rocks had to be tumbled over the years to get this shape?" he asks, his voice rising in excited inflection. "When the river gets rough, these rocks hit against each other. It's like putting them in a giant tumbler. But these were done by nature!"

Neither geologist nor gemologist, the 75-year-old former financial planner who collects ordinary rocks describes himself as pretty ordinary, too. He sometimes has trouble distinguishing between metamorphic and igneous. Geological names and mineral content tend to escape him.

But the reason Imgrund might be considered a rock star sits just off his driveway. There, as stately as it is squat, is a series of nine cylindrical towers of nature-polished granite that Imgrund self-deprecatingly labels "Auburn's Stonehenge."

Held together with chicken wire and Imgrund's painstakingly precise placement, set randomly atop a bed of crushed pebbles, the spires resemble Buddhist stupas in shape if not intent.

"We are churchgoers, but there's nothing religious or anything like that in it," Imgrund said.

Not unless you count an intense love of nature as an interest beyond the secular. Imgrund and his wife, noted local ceramicist Gerda Francesca, have been avid hikers on Auburn's multifarious trails since they moved to the area in 1995. What began as an exercise in, well, exercise for Imgrund soon turned into a hobby that has resulted in the work of art that locals see today.

Time was, Imgrund didn't give a schist about granite or quartz or any other rock. He grew up in western Pennsylvania, "where it was flat and the rocks around the rivers were just rocks."

Coming to the Sierra foothills gave Imgrund his first glimpse of geologic powers.

"I started noticing the stones, how rounded they all were," he said. "I mean, if you cut them in half, they'd be almost symmetrical. I just started picking them up on the shoreline. I never did any digging. Just rounded rocks on the shoreline. When a flood came, you'd get a new crop."

Year after year, rock after rock, Imgrund would take a few of the more handsome specimens from the confluence and stuff them in his backpack. He checked with an Auburn State Recreation Area ranger and learned that it's legal to remove up to 15 pounds of rocks per day – but only for personal use, not for sale.

One or two rocks an outing eventually became 10 or so pounds – and over the years, Imgrund wore out two backpacks from the weight of stones lugged from the confluence. By last spring, several large piles of rounded granite – from tennis ball to rugby in size – were strewn in the couple's backyard and in a fallow area near the driveway.

Francesca the wife looked at the heaping piles of boulders and suggested that Imgrund do something with them, perhaps something to beautify the landscaping. Imgrund, never artistically inspired before, had a vision: stone towers.

Francesca the artist loved the idea and lent her discerning eye to the project.

"It was her idea for the shape – what is it, sweetie, stupa?" Imgrund said. "She also said it had to be odd-numbered."

Francesca: "I also wanted the heights to be different. I wanted variety. It makes a greater impact for the viewer. It brings out the beauty in the design. But I really just wanted him to do something with all those rocks. For years, I waited for something to happen."

Imgrund spent hours carefully layering each rock inside the wire netting. He said he put the "less-attractive stones" – those not especially rounded or smooth – in the middle or at the base and leaves the top for the true rock stars, those with standout shape, texture or tint.

And yes, even greenstone granite has subtle color gradations. Whereas Imgrund favors solid-hued black granite for its smoothness, Francesca marvels at the color schemes.

"Look at the green in this one," she said, thrusting out a grayish, pale-green stone. She dropped it and picked up another, exclaiming, "Turquoise!"

Imgrund shrugged.

"For me, it's just the shape," he said.

Neither cared much for the potential that some of the rocks might actually be valuable. That wasn't the motivation.

"Who'd collect this granite?" Imgrund asked. "It's ordinary. At least that's what I'm told."

Perhaps. But to Sierra College geology professor Richard Hilton, the confluence and other stops along the shores of the American River offer a treasure trove of Earth's history.

"I take students down to the confluence and we walk out on boulder and gravel bars, and I say, 'Collect as many types of rocks as you can,' " Hilton said.

"What you're getting is the more durable rocks more upstream. The most common are greenstone. Old sea floor, basically. The ocean floor in California was scraped off and added through plate tectonics. That addition

involved a lot of heat and pressure, which allowed new minerals to grow at expense of old minerals. Your new mineral might be a green mineral like chlorite."

A weathering process, Hilton said, can result in iron oxides that give many rocks their green, blue or even red tinge. Other rocks develop veins or dikes – cracks in the granite in which "hot fluids come up and crystallize."

Occasionally – *very* occasionally, Hilton stressed – one of the minerals that sneak in is gold.

Alas, in 10 years of turning over rocks and appreciating their beauty, Imgrund has never found anything resembling that precious metal.

Not that he's looking. The way he views it, granite is golden.